

IN CAMERA

Ireland set

Fine Gael loses its spiritual home

Councillor Eoin Costello's resignation of the FG whip is the latest sign of the party's decline in Dun Laoghaire

SHANE COLEMAN
POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT

IF there is one constituency that symbolises the decline of Fine Gael since its peak in the 1980s, it has to be Dún Laoghaire.

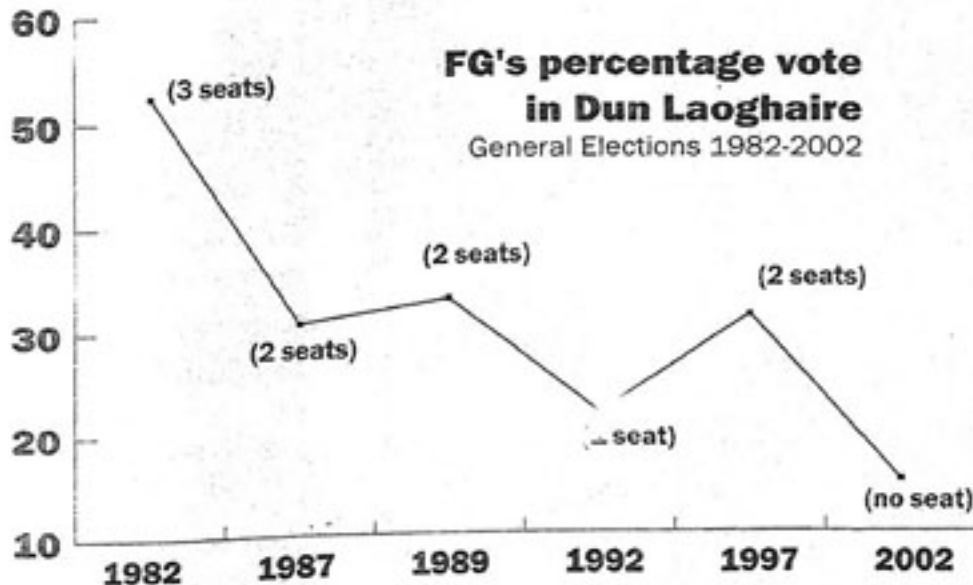
Back in the days of Garret FitzGerald's liberal crusade - when the party seemed set to eclipse Fianna Fáil as the largest political party in the state - Fine Gael had 53% of the vote in the constituency: three TDs and two senators.

Dún Laoghaire has always had a mix of the very well-off and a large number of working-class voters, but with its record of voting the "right way" in successive referenda, it was as close to a spiritual home as Fine Gael ever had.

Yet, by last May's general election, Fine Gael's share of the vote was down to 15% and the party, for the first time ever, failed to win a seat in the constituency. Party activists no doubt consoled themselves with the thought that things couldn't get any worse.

They would have been wrong. First, they had to watch as the reputation of the party's standard-bearer in the last general election, Liam Cosgrave, took a further battering. It emerged in the Flood tribunal that Cosgrave received far more money from Frank Dunlop than he had initially told the tribunal.

His resignation from the party short-circuited an inves-



tigation into his earlier account to a party inquiry and seemed to bring to an end a political dynasty that produced two heads of government and stretched back to the foundation of the state.

Then last week came the news that the party's brightest and best-regarded councillor in the area, Eoin Costello, had resigned the whip of the Fine Gael council group in Dún Laoghaire Rathdown county council.

In a measured statement, Costello outlined two reasons for this decision. The "rapidly

increasing" council tax for the refuse service, which the Fine Gael group is obliged to support because of its power-sharing agreement with Fianna Fáil, was the first. The rescinding in April of the affordable housing resolution in the draft development plan through the majority support of the Fine Gael group was the second.

Stressing that his first obligation was to make decisions in the best interests of the people and local communities in his ward, Costello said this principle and his loyalty to the Fine Gael group on the council were

"increasingly at odds". The point had been reached, he added, where the conflict between these two was "no longer sustainable".

While he praised party leader Enda Kenny, saying he had shown a willingness to take on vested interests in the party at a national level, he added that "this determination has not percolated through to the local level yet".

Local party sources admit the party is in crisis in the constituency and there is a fair degree of "internal bickering". There is still some residual

anger towards party headquarters over the decision to add Dublin county board chairman John Bailey to the party ticket for the general election, as well as over the then leadership's open-armed welcome to PD defector Helen Keogh. Both failed to make an impact in the general election.

"It's a bloody disaster," one party source said week, adding that the party's endless prevarication over whether or not to add a third candidate to the party ticket last May, before finally plumping for Bailey, was "farical" and led to a lot of bad feeling in the constituency.

The source is concerned that it will be "hard to undo the damage done". While the local elections are just over a year away, he believes the party's real focus should be the next general election. A new big-name candidate is required by then, the source says, adding: "I don't think we should waste their time by asking them to run for the council".

Despite his setback last year, John Bailey has lost none of his appetite for the fray. While some party members question whether he is the man who can lead the fight for the party in the constituency, his work rate is beyond reproach. He has spent the past 11 months campaigning three and four nights a week and was also vice chairman on the Fine Gael task force set up to revitalise the party in the capi-

tal. Bailey is likely to win a nomination to contest the local elections, while his daughter is also putting her name forward as a candidate in the Shankill/Ballybrack ward. The move has prompted exaggerated jokes that there will be a "Bailey running in every ward". However, Bailey dismisses suggestions that he is trying to take over the constituency: "I'm a team player. I don't want to be captain or manager".

Born and bred in the constituency, Bailey is bullish about Enda Kenny's leadership and the future. He also claims that party morale has never been as high. He says he is "hopeful" that Costello can be persuaded to return to the fold and believes the party can add to the seven council seats it currently holds in the area.

Not everyone shares his optimism. However, there is general agreement that if the party gets its act together, there is still "a certain Fine Gael vote in Dún Laoghaire". But one party source says that vote is largely "liberal, right-wing" and can only be wooed by "occupying Fine Gael's ground, not Labour's as we are currently trying to do".

One thing is certain: if Fine Gael is to have a future, it has to win at least one seat in Dún Laoghaire in the next general election. Those heady days of 1982 must seem a long way away.